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The First Secret Sub Salvage—in 1928

Operation Jennifer, the secret CIA salvage of part of a Soviet nuclear-missile submarine from the depths of the Pacific, is an intriguing intelligence coup involving pioneer technological expertise under the "cover" of an underwater mineral exploration mission. This is the saga of a British submarine which was sunk by the Russians and salvaged by them to sail again under the red flag. And sunk again and raised once more and . . .

By Daniel F. Gilmore
United Press International

The British Admiralty in 1919 cryptically reported that its 1,150-ton submarine L55 was "missing and presumed sunk" with 42 officers and crewmen aboard. Then silence fell.

It was not until Sept. 22, 1928, that L. Meyer, head of the diving department of the Red fleet, disclosed in the newspaper Pravda that two Russian destroyers had sunk the L55 with gunfire and that the sub had been salvaged along with the skeletons of its crew.

L. Edgar PRINA editor emeritus of Sea POWER researched and chronicled the saga of L55 in the May issue

of the magazine, official publication of the U.S. Navy League.

PRINA, a retired navy captain, wrote: "The Soviets are also somewhat sophisticated in the field of bringing sunken submarines to the surface . . .

"On 10 August 1928, they raised the British submarine L55 from Kaporva Bay on the south side of the Gulf of Finland near Kronstadt (a town on the small island of Kotlin 15 miles from what is now Leningrad).

"The British government never knew precisely what had happened to L55 until the Soviets announced, nine years after it had been lost, that they had successfully raised the submarine."

The Soviets said they sank the L55 because it was part of a Royal Navy detachment sent to take Kronstadt, destroy the Red Fleet and help White Russian forces win Leningrad. Two years after the Bolshevik Revolution the Reds were still fighting the White anti-Communist forces.

RUSSIAN divers found the L55 on Oct. 20, 1927, with live mine fields still in the area.

"She was lying at a depth of 108 feet on a soft clay and

sand bed," a contemporary report said. "Thanks to the softness of the bottom it was comparatively easy to draw the steel hawsers under the hull and by Aug. 8, everything was ready for the actual rising.

"The work was begun at 9:15 a.m. on Aug. 10 and by 10 o'clock the raising was finished and a flagstaff with a simple red flag was affixed to the prize."

The Russians recovered the skeletons of the British crew. The admiralty wanted to send a warship to Kronstadt to bring home the remains but the Soviets refused because London had broken diplomatic relations with Moscow the year before. The Soviets finally did give permission for the British merchantman Truro to pick up the remains.

"Twenty Soviet sailors mounted guard with fixed bayonets and as the barge (with the remains) neared the Truro Soviet warships lowered their ensigns and crews manned the ships' rails while a naval band on the barge played the dead march.

"AS THE Truro with her freight of dead steamed out of the roadstead a salute was fired from a (Soviet) warship and all the merchantmen in the harbor dipped their flags."

(The CIA said it was careful to observe military honors when it recovered several bodies from the Soviet sub found last year and buried them at sea.)

What then of L55?

Prina says the record after the 1928 salvage is sketchy but that the Soviets refitted the sub and sent it to sea under the red ensign.

Pre-1945 issues of Jane's Fighting Ships the authoritative British publication on world navies, said only:

"Lost in Baltic, 1919 and subsequently raised, repaired and put in service Oct. 9, 1931. Reported lost the same month by collision with a merchant vessel. In service (again) for training purposes. Speed not above 14 knots."

It may well be that L55 sailed on into World War II and may have gone down for the third and final time.

Prina concludes that the British-built and commissioned L55, twice-sunk, twice-raised, "spent more time in the Soviet than in the Royal Navy."